

Dig

A remote corner of South Australia, on the banks of Coopers Creek. A stockman and the manager of Innamincka Station are by a fence.

Jacky Ya want me to check the far paddock, boss?

Tom That's the idea. Got all ya need?

Jacky (nodding) Don't need much. Only coupla days.

Tom See ya when you get back.

Jacky leaves, and a couple, Esrom and Lily, come up from the water.

Esrom He won't get lost?

Tom (surprised by them, but hiding it) He couldn't lose himself if he tried.

Esrom You depend on those men, I suppose?

Tom We do. The way they depend on me. Who do you depend on?

Esrom My wife. My four wheel drive. My wits.

Tom You're lucky to have some. You're camping there are you?

Esrom Got in last night. Stay for a couple of days, depending ...

Tom Depending on what?

Esrom How we like it, mainly.

Tom How you like it. (musing) What if it doesn't like you?

Esrom How would I know that?

Tom It's funny country out here. Things happen that you're not expecting. You have to be ready.

Esrom Ready for what?

Tom You're not ready, I see. I've got a lot to do. There's a little store at the homestead, if you're needing supplies. Petrol, if you're running low. Seeya.

Esrom Any fish in here? ((Coopers Creek))

Tom (moving away) Such things have been seen. Don't depend on it. (He goes.)

Esrom Not very friendly.

Lily He doesn't want us here.

Esrom He doesn't own the place. He only works for the owners.

Lily I can't imagine anyone owning this place.

Esrom A few deadbeats, keeping away from the law. There used to be a pub, and a nurse. Couple of beds for men who got crook.

Lily You make it sound pretty wretched.

Esrom What do you think it was like?

They are startled by the sounds of shots, and breaking glass.

Lily What's that?

Esrom One of those funny things he was talking about. They had the biggest bottle heap in the world, at the pub.

Lily What pub?
Esrom It's gone now. Hoons drive up here for a shooting weekend. They line up the bottles and fire at them.

Offstage, guns go off and bullets smash bottles from the vanished hotel's stack.

Lily That was years ago. Someone's doing it now.
Esrom We're in a time warp. Or call it what you like. All time's present at the same time. (He feels foolish.) If you see what I mean.

Lily A time warp? What are you talking about?

Esrom Are you feeling older? And younger too?

Lily I am as a matter of fact.

Esrom That's what I'm talking about. It's one of the things he was talking about.

Lily That man? What would he know?

Esrom Things that would surprise us, I suspect.

We hear the roar of an aeroplane, and then, mysteriously, a clergyman (Flynn) appears. Tom returns to welcome the arrival.

Flynn You need a couple of sisters out here. We'll raise money and build a nursing home.

Tom Sounds good.

Flynn Isolation's a curse. We'll start a flying doctor scheme. Radio when you need help.

Tom It's a great idea, Pastor Flynn, but you're wrong about loneliness. It's one of the best things you can have.

Flynn Really?

Tom You're a man of god. Don't you think we crowd him out if we keep talking all the time?

Flynn I suppose that's true ...

Tom It's as hot as hell out here, and hard as the hardest rock. When someone does a kindness, it's as if an old wound's healing.

Flynn God has mysterious ways of showing himself.

Tom And so have we.

Both disappear.

Esrom Where'd they go?

Lily Very strange. What's going to happen now?

Two more figures appear, Mickey and Minnie. He is small, and she is very large. He's a bachelor of fifty, she's a young woman of twenty. Their arrival is marked by another fusillade of shots and the smashing of glass bottles.

Minnie They didn't do that in our time.

Mickey I'd've grabbed their guns and shot'em if they'd done it while I was drinking.

Minnie Drinking was important to you.

Mickey Only an excuse to see you in the pub.

Minnie That was my excuse to be where you were.

Mickey Together.

Minnie We had a lot of years together, darling ...

Mickey Nobody ever called me that, till you ...

Minnie Nobody called you darling?

Mickey Nobody, ever, at all.

Minnie Till me?

Mickey I needed you to change my life.
Minnie I needed you to change mine.
Mickey Hey, it was a good thing you came here!
Minnie Where else could you go, if you were built like me?
Mickey This is not the end of the earth!
Esrom Well, it is ...
Minnie Who the hell are you?
Lily You'd call us tourists. We've come to have a look.
Mickey There's nothing out here to look at!
Minnie (taking Mickey's arm) All the good men have been taken.

Esrom laughs.

Mickey (truculently) Well?
Lily Don't be offended. We're not married, you see.
Mickey (proudly) Well, we are!
Minnie How long's it been, darling?
Mickey Five minutes, as best I can recall.
Minnie The best five minutes of my life.
Mickey The best twenty years of mine!
Esrom When are the explorers coming back?
Mickey About a hundred years ago ...
Lily That doesn't sound right.
Mickey Don't ask me! I can't read or write! She's the brains in our combination.
Minnie Brains only get you so far.
Esrom (pointing at the country around them) They got you as far as this.

Mickey It looks like nothing, doesn't it. Absolutely nothing at all. And bloody hot. The arse-end of the earth ... (He's interrupted by the sound of shots, and glass bottles smashing.) And hoons smashing bottles. Maybe we've come down in the world ...
Minnie ... and maybe we've gone up!
Lily You've still got your pride.
Mickey The sunsets'll take your breath away. And the way people treat each other. You've got to be good ...
Esrom Are you really kind?
Mickey If you want to know, you have to live here. Put yourself to the test.
Esrom (humbled) I don't think I'd be good enough.
Lily Don't reduce yourself, my love.
Esrom He's given me a challenge, and I don't think I'm up to it.
Lily What was the challenge, darling?
Esrom To be able to live with nothing ...

Enter two nursing sisters, Ina and Liz.

Ina The nursing home's gone.
Liz They've taken it away. It's a station homestead now.
Ina We're left with nothing, then ...
Liz That's how we were when we came.
Ina City girls, full of goodness, we thought ...
Liz And we found a goodness greater than ours, by far.
Ina It made us humble.
Liz We could do so little.

Tom	(from offstage) You'll never be forgotten out here.		
Liz	Who's that calling?		
Tom	Tom. I manage the station now. Come and have a look.	Lily	away. He didn't need no saving. He was alright where he was. Here with my mum.
Ina	There'll be so much that's new ...	Alice	Do you think he ever knew?
Liz	And so much that hasn't changed. Those rocks!	Lily	No. He never come back.
Minnie	They still break your heart ...	Alice	And you think he would have come back?
Mickey	Till the sun sets on them, and you say, I'm going to sit down and sing, and drink a beer ...	Esrom	I'm his girl. He'da wanted to see me, if he knew.
Minnie	... or three!	Alice	You'd like to see him?
Liz	Some things never change. Do you still crawl over The Cobbler?	Alice	They showed me a picture once. I don't know if it was him. That's what they said.
Mickey	There's a road, now. Better than in your day. They get oil and gas out there. (He points.) The horizon's not so empty.	Lily	How old are you, Alice?
Ina	I'd like it if the explorers came back. I'd listen to what they'd say.	Alice	I dunno. When they buried me they said I was seventy one.
Minnie	They'd say we should have left it to the blacks.	Esrom	Can you see all those years in your mind?
Ina	They needed tenderness too. (Yellow Alice slips on quietly.) Who's this?	Alice	Like they was today. But I need a lot of rest. I'm going up the creek to lie down. Somewhere near that tree.
Minnie	Yellow Alice. She was old when you were here. She's only a spirit now, but she remembers.	Lily	Goodbye now, Alice. Sleep well when you get there.
Alice	That man they call King, he put spirit in my mum.	Esrom	We'll come and see how you are.
Esrom	What?	Ina	Innamincka's entering your soul.
Alice	Very cold at night, he was almost dead. My mum took him in her arms to warm him. He put spirit inside her, then the whitefellas came back. Took him	Liz	Remember how it did that to us, my love?
		Ina	We'll never have those days again, Elizabeth.
		Liz	You married a man from here.
		Ina	The best thing I ever did.
		Liz	And he outlived you ...
		Ina	We knew it would be that way.
		Liz	A fine man for a fine woman.

Ina (her spirit-state overcoming her) Let's go with Alice, and lie down.

Liz and Ina walk off as Alice did.

Mickey They had their years ...

Minnie They had their time ...

Mickey ... and so did we, my love ...

Minnie ... and so did we, my love ...

They too follow Alice, Liz and Ina. Tom enters.

Tom Things've gone quiet. Jacky should be back soon.
(Jacky appears as if called.) Everything okay?

Jacky No problem there boss. Everything okay.

There is another flurry of shooting, and smashing of glass.

Tom (casually) Fuckin hoons.

Jacky Others all gone to the Dig Tree.

Tom Must've seen the explorers coming back.

Tom and Jacky also go upstream until they reach the famous tree.

Jacky Nobody here.

Tom Spirits. You never know when they're around and when they're somewhere else.

Jacky Whitefella spirits starting to crowd out blackfella.

Tom (affectionately) Shut up Jacky. There's plenty of room.

Jacky Some of them spirits like great big thunder clouds ...

Tom ... and some of them're so tiny you wouldn't hear a squeak!

Jacky Must be them now boss. The splorers're coming.

The land grows dark, and the approach of the three explorers is indicated by sounds indicative of their yearning, their desperation.

Jacky Oooooooooohhh ...

Tom Out on their feet.

Jacky Oooooooooohhh ...

Tom Absolutely bugged, and they're coming back tozilch.

Tom and Jacky watch as the explorers look around the site.

Burke Gone!

Wills (at the tree) Dig.

King I can't go on, sir. We've marched thirty miles today.

Burke What have they left us? Anything to eat?

Wills (as if hypnotised) Dig.

King I'll do it sir. (But he lets the shovel slips from his hands.)

Wills Dig.

Burke Careful. There might be glass.

Wills Dig.

King Don't say that all the time, sir, it makes me think my life's been buried there.

Burke Well what do you think they've done?

King I don't know what they've done, sir. Why did they leave us on our own?

Wills (digging) Dig.

Burke Dig indeed. What else is there to do? If only we could dig a hole right through the earth and come out where it's green.

King You're an Irishman, Mister Burke. You remember your country now?

Wills Dig.

Burke I can see it clearly, King. There were no stones in the Ireland of my youth, and everything was green.

King Will you see it again, Mister Burke, or is this the last we see before we die?

Wills Dig.

Burke Dig if you want to. We might as well have a grave!

Jacky Why they starving when blackfella got plenty to eat? Eh? You tell me that.

Tom Because they were the biggest fools that ever were.

Esrom (to Lily) Someone's talking sense.

Lily They're dying men, darling. We all know the end. There's no mystery here.

Tom That's just what there is. Strange. It upets me every time.

Esrom You see this often?

Jacky I don't like to come here.

Tom And neither do I, but I have to.

Lily Why?

Tom I'm the manager of this place. I mustn't let it happen again.

Lily Can you stop it?

Tom Sometimes no. Despite the grim reminder.

Wills There's a box sir. Shall I open?

Burke Why not, Wills? It's not as if our lives are hanging by that thread ...

King What thread are you talking about Mister Burke?

Burke I've marched thirty miles today. My mind's a blur.

Wills There's a note. (He hands it to Burke, who looks at it in his confused state.) Sir?

King Mister Burke?

Burke What's the date, today, Mister Wills? What's the day?

Wills My diary sir.

(He shows it to his leader.)

Burke It was only this morning that they left.

King (staggering, and peering into the night) Brahe! If you hear me, call! (after a silence) Call!

Jacky Nobody there, mate. Except the spirits, and they can't get you home.

The spirits we've already met begin to appear, and also the black people of the Cooper, who are both contemptuous of the white men, and concerned.

Blacks Aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Mickey Poor buggers. Never had a chance.

Minnie They did it wrong ...

Mickey ... and paid the price.

Liz That's why Mister Flynn put us here ...

Ina ... so there'd be someone to give help ...
 Tom ... whenever we're in need ...
 Mickey ... and that's all the time, for most of us.
 Minnie Darling?
 Mickey I had you my love. You came when I'd given up hope.
 Lily Aaahhh ...
 Esrom What is it, love?
 Lily We've brought ourselves to the very edge of despair ...
 King Can we lie down now, Mister Burke? We might feel stronger in the morning.
 Burke We might. And we might be lucky ...
 Wills Lucky, Mister Burke? What luck do you see around you? Here, where Satan himself wouldn't care to stay!
 Tom He'd say it was too bloody hot!
 Jacky Get used to anything after a while. Got water all the time.
 Burke It would be good fortune if God himself put his hand on our brows, to cool them, so we could get some rest.
 King And brought us a bed to lie on ...
 Wills (passionately) ... instead of these everlasting stones!
 Jacky You fella rest now. Somebody come for you, in a while.

Ina (as the explorers lie down) They did, of course, and it was too late.
 Alice (referring to King) That man my father. The photo was right. He woke up in the arms of my mother.
 Liz It wasn't proper, but it was kind.
 Ina Being kind ... it's the last thing we can do, and the first.

The spirits from the past begin to disappear.

Mickey Were you only being kind to me, my love?
 Minnie No, I loved you for what you were.
 Mickey What I was ... I'm only a story now ...
 Tom That's the fate we're given, Mick. Live a little while and leave a tale.
 Jacky I do the top paddock tomorrow boss. See everything all right.

Tom nods, and everybody moves away, leaving the three explorers on the ground.

In the story of Burke and Wills one disaster follows another, in places where mistakes are dearly paid for. Anyone travelling across the gibber plains near Innamincka knows how harshly, unforgivingly, the land can treat the traveller. Anyone seeing the flowers after rain, or the sunsets, knows the beauty that's on offer too. As usual in such circumstances, humanity can be at its best and its worst; this libretto tries to show these forces in their operation.